

Ter Bogt Dairy

Hielkje and Freddy ter Bogt 'emigrated' back from New Zealand to Germany to farm on a smaller, and more 'life-style friendly' scale.



Number of cows:	170
Amount of land:	150 hectares
Total year production:	2.5 million kg
Additional staff:	One (part time)



Hielkje and Freddy ter Bogt



The 2:8 tandem parlour will be replaced

German unit has feed mixing room and solar panels

From 3,000 to 300 cows

After 10 years of dairying in New Zealand, producers Freddy and Hielkje ter Bogt 'emigrated' back to Europe two years ago, deliberately choosing to farm on a smaller scale. Here, they say, they can 'see the cows again'.

text **Jorieke van Cappellen**

It was meant to be for just one year. But it became 10 years. Producers Freddy and Hielkje ter Bogt look back on New Zealand as a period of much freedom and of extremely hard work.

"We were 18 and 21 years old, had just left agricultural college and were keen to work abroad for a year," says Hielkje. "We weren't attached to a particular place in the Netherlands because at home it was not possible for us to take over a family farm. We packed a few things together and got on a plane."

This adventurous step shows the mentality of the two producers. Hielkje knew from a young age that she wanted to do 'something' with cows. With a pig farm at home, Freddy had a background and training in pig production. "Hielkje encouraged me to go with her to New Zealand. And I thought why shouldn't we give it a go?"

Once there, Freddy and Hielkje got to work as milkers on a dairy unit on the South Island. "In New Zealand the system of share milking is common practice," says Freddy. "The share milker owns cows but does not own a farm. You enter into an agreement with the owner of a farm so that you can milk and graze your herd. For this you get paid for part of the milk yield. You can live from this

and expand your herd. Or take on staff," he explains.

Freddy and Hielkje were there at a good time, they say. "The milk price was very good. And in New Zealand you don't pay any wealth tax so you can quickly build up assets. On the other hand, as a share milker, you do take on all the risks because you have the livestock and the staff," says Hielkje.

In 12 years, Hielkje and Freddy's modest herd expanded to 3,000 cows and the young couple became joint owners of four dairies. "We worked incredibly hard. It was milking, moving the herd around, and more milking. We became bigger and bigger but we didn't really intend to farm on that scale," says Freddy. "Dairy farming is constantly becoming more commercial. We did everything in consultation with our associates and, over time, we saw more of the office than we did of the cows. We increasingly disliked that way of life."

Family farm

They decided to go back to a 'family farm' environment and, in 2010, the assets they had built up in New Zealand were sold. "We considered moving to Australia, but the weather there is very changeable. So we decided to head for

Western Europe, where the size of dairy farms was closer to what we were looking for."

Not everyone would relocate with such apparent ease. But Freddy turns it around. "In principle it doesn't matter to me where I live and have my farm. All things considered, you don't really miss anything if you go away. Each time I

After expansion, the cow house now has capacity for 190 dairy cows





The roof of the cow house is rented out to an energy company and covered in solar panels Different feeds are stored separately

came back to family and friends in the Netherlands everyone had got a bit older, but life as we had left it still went on as before. Only at Christmas did we miss the Netherlands, because in New Zealand we had to celebrate in the sun with warm temperatures of 35 degrees Celsius.”

However, going back to the Netherlands was not an option. Germany seemed a more attractive prospect. “The milk quota in the Netherlands and land were too expensive. On an investment of a million kilogrammes of milk quota there was already a difference more than £700,000 between the Netherlands and Germany.”

With five children born in the meantime, the social aspect also played a part. “In Germany, the education system is very good,” says Hielkje. “And it is now rather easier to travel to the Netherlands to visit the family.”

Solar panels

The dairy operation, based in the German village of Westoverledingen, was built in 1984 and in poor condition. Freddy and Hielkje carried out renovation work and expanded the housing to accommodate 190 cows. They run the unit with one part-time employee. The roof of the cowshed is rented out to an energy company and

partly covered in solar panels. It provides the business with £16,000 and, after 15 years, they will own the solar panels. “We used this money to improve the roof,” adds Freddy.

A large equipment building has just been finished. Freddy opens the automatic sliding door to reveal the closed feed mixing centre. “I want a herd with between 250 and 300 very healthy cows that average around 11,000kg,” says Freddy. “The feeds are in separate silos, so you don’t get any vermin in the feed, and I want my farm to look clean and tidy without ugly silage piles everywhere.” The cows are fed a TMR of grass and maize silage, brewers’ grain, wheat, cornmeal, citrus pulp, rape seed and minerals.

Grass quality

The management system in Germany and the extensive management in New Zealand are miles apart. So how did the transition go? “We did have a lot of experience with looking after and grazing large herds, but here we had to learn how you can milk cows in the best way possible and keep them healthy in more intensive conditions,” says Freddy. “In New Zealand we had a stocking rate of five cows per hectare. The milk production in Germany is a little higher and that is why we have to deal with milk fever.”

There were more hurdles following the move. When the cows arrived in November 2011 the weather became extremely cold and everything froze. “The farm yard did not yet have a hard surface and it was a heap of rubbish with all the snow and ice.”

“When we went from the Netherlands to New Zealand we had nothing. But when we went from New Zealand to Germany we had five children and we started up a completely different kind of farm,” adds Hielkje. “It felt as if we didn’t know how to farm.

“What I found really awful was that, at



first, the children really didn't like the school. Of course they didn't know the language, nor did we. Fortunately, in the meantime, they have now completely settled in."

Freddy and Hielkje graze the herd for a few hours each day on the grassland behind the cow house. The area is too small for a New Zealand-style farm and grass quality is also poor. The couple have reseeded 70% of the grassland. "By reseeding we have 30% more grass production than before and the quality has also improved," says Freddy.

The cows eat enthusiastically at the feed fence and they look healthy. "A good cow has a plenty of capacity to be able to eat, as well as a fine udder," he adds.

A track through the grassland leads to their neighbour's stables, which Freddy and Hielkje bought to provide accommodation for young stock and dry cows.

Heifer rearing

Freddy is keen for the young stock to have a good ration. "We feed the young stock solidly, up until they're ready to calve. When calving, a heifer must be well developed so that she can turn her energy into milk from the outset." Too little attention, both in New Zealand and in Germany, is paid to good heifer rearing.

"The replacement rate is very high. Some 40% of heifers do not make a second lactation in Germany."

In the long term the 2:8 tandem milking parlour will be replaced by one with more capacity. But Freddy and Hielkje don't mind working hard. "It might seem a bit odd, but we really like working," says Freddy. "In New Zealand



The cows are managed as one group and fed a TMR

we learned what you can achieve anything if you set your mind to it."

"It was a period of our lives that we wouldn't have missed for the world.

But, here in Germany, I am doing what I have always really wanted to do," adds Hielkje. "And here I can see the cows again." |

The dairy operation in Germany was in poor condition and required considerable investment

